



Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*
September 2006

The Physical Attributes of Well-Designed Workplaces

by *Barbara Armstrong and Mark Sekula*

Barbara Armstrong, Principal, and Mark Sekula, Associate Principal, are senior workplace strategists with [Kahler Slater Architects](#) of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The work of today is drastically different than the work processes that supported the industrial revolution. Today's product – knowledge – requires a different environment in which it can be “produced,” nurtured, and shared.

Based on our experience as workplace designers, along with our research and review of current literature regarding workplace design, productivity, and business trends, we established a list of physical attributes associated with a well-designed workplace. We focused on those issues that may have the most significant impact on knowledge workers.

We believe that the fourteen attributes described below are those that have the biggest positive impact on the physical workplace, and that individually and collectively contribute to productivity measurements and bottom-line performance. Understanding these attributes and their impact also can help to create a compelling business case to seek improvements in your own work environment.

In research by BOSTI (Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation), as reported in “Dispersing Widespread Myths about Workplace Design,” the following three qualities were considered to have the strongest effect on job satisfaction. We believe they stand out as key attributes to measure:

1. The ability to perform distraction free work as an individual;
2. The ability to perform undistracted group/team work; and
3. Having environments that support collaboration and impromptu interaction

An individual's ability to perform his or her job efficiently and effectively is substantially influenced by a number of physical environment factors that can be affected by good design and planning. These attributes include:

4. Attention to thermal comfort;
5. Direct visual access to daylight;
6. Attention to glare factors;
7. Proactive attention to ergonomics; and
8. Workspace size allocations by functional needs, not hierarchy.

We believe that several attributes can either enhance or create challenges to productivity:

9. Appropriate adjacencies to support workflow;
10. Simple and clear way finding, i.e., understandable spatial organization; and
11. Ease of accommodations to adapt to changing technology

While overall well-being and health can be influenced by simple attributes such as;

12. Flexibility of workspace to accommodate personal work styles; and
13. The inclusion of a professionally maintained live green plant program.

In our recent research of companies designated as Best Places to Work, we found that an important attribute in achieving a well-designed workplace is:

14. The expression and manifestation of the organization's culture

We believe that the benefits to achieving a well-designed workplace can be measured in many non-physical ways. With the changing workforce demographics, it is wise to use every available means to attract and retain top talent to your organization and to leverage that diverse talent to be creative and innovative. Using your workplace as an asset to achieve these goals makes good business sense.

Summary

The physical workplace can be a critical factor in the success of an organization. It is an important factor in supporting an organization's business initiatives and it can be proven to be an effective tool to improve performance, rather than being seen only as a cost of doing business. The physical workplace is often the second-largest asset of an organization; this asset can be used to effectively attract and retain talent, typically the first major asset of any organization.

In today's world, the role of the workplace is about:

- Enabling new ways for people to work within an organization;
- Valuing the individual;
- Implementing new technology;
- Shifting or reinforcing culture and change;
- Leveraging facilities as assets;
- Facilitating faster and more simple change; and
- Achieving financial objectives - tracking how workplace changes help achieve the organization's goals.

The complete report on our research, *What Makes A Great Workplace*, is available by e-mailing your request to msekula@kahlerslater.com.

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

Future of Work Agenda is a free monthly electronic newsletter produced by the *Work Design Collaborative*.

Direct inquiries to either Charles Grantham at +1 928.771.9138, or charlie@thefutureofwork.net, or James Ware at +1 510.558.1434, or jim@thefutureofwork.net